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Review of *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon* edited by William R. Handley

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The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon. Edited by William R. Handley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xii + 386 pp. Illustrations, photographs, selected bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

The Brokeback Book's subtitle suggests that it aims to be something more comprehensive than a collection of essays on Annie Proulx's story or director Ang Lee's film. In this respect, this impressive book works well to bring together some previously published essays, such as those by David Leavitt and Daniel Mendelsohn,

which took particular positions on the debates around the “gayness” of the film, and places them alongside direct and indirect responses to such critical readings. Hence we have the producer of the film James Schamus’s reply to Mendelsohn in which he argues that through “mainstreaming” gayness “we disturb the given sites—some closeted, some not—from which gay identities struggle for recognition,” or new essays such as Mun-Hou Lo’s discussion of “forbearance,” Vanessa Osborne’s piece on Marxist notions of the “laboring body,” or Judith Halberstam on “queering the Western.” Thus the book clearly interests itself in the “phenomenon” of *both* story and film, revealing the intense cultural politics of a circulating text that has had an incredible significance to the lives of gay and straight communities.

At times, however, the “personal” in this book, in the form of anecdotes of first reading the story or viewing the film, or discussing either afterwards, can overwhelm the reader, and, like some other sections, become a little too repetitive. For me, the collection works best when it finds nuanced ways to bring the “politics” to the fore in order to see the film or story in relation to wider issues of identity, power, or cultural representation. Alex Hunt’s essay “West of the Closet, Fear on the Range” is exemplary, drawing on the personal (as ex-bull rider) to interrogate the text through detailed, intelligent examinations of story and film.

Certainly a percentage of these essays do extend our knowledge and understanding of the “Brokeback Mountain” phenomenon, and yet one missing dimension is any reflection on the existence of the text beyond North America. There is no consideration of its transnational life and no voice from outside the continent. For a book with the stated intention to explore the critical routes of the work, this is a surprising omission.

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